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Integration of United Nations information centres with field offices of the United Nations Development Programme

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. In 1992, an initiative was launched to integrate, wherever feasible, operations of certain United Nations information centres with field offices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The main objectives were the following:

(a) To present a unified image of the United Nations in the field;

(b) To enhance information activities in all areas of the Organization's work, including development issues;

(c) To achieve economies of scale through the sharing of common services;

(d) To facilitate inter-agency coordination and avoid duplication.

2. At the request of the General Assembly, the Secretary-General submitted a report in 1993 entitled "Integration of United Nations information centres with other United Nations offices, while maintaining the functional autonomy of the United Nations information centres" (A/AC.198/1993/7). Having considered that report, the Assembly subsequently requested the Secretary-General to continue the integration exercise in a cost-effective manner and, whenever feasible, on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the views of the host Government. Furthermore, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to ensure that the information functions and the autonomy of United Nations information centres were not adversely affected by the integration exercise. Those principles have been reiterated by the Committee on Information and the General Assembly, most recently in resolution 52/220 of 22 December 1997 and 53/59 B of 3 December 1998. In the latter resolution, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to the Committee at its twenty-first session on the status of the integration exercise.

3. As requested by the General Assembly, the present report provides an overview of the status of the integration exercise since the last report on this subject was prepared for consideration by the Committee on Information at its nineteenth session in 1997 (A/AC.198/1997/5).

II. Background

4. At the inception of the integration exercise in April 1992, discussions were held among representatives of the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, the Department of Public Information, UNDP, the Department of Administration and Management, the Office of Legal Affairs, the Office of Human Resources Management and

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the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Finance. It was agreed that the 1990 Agreement between UNDP and the Department of Public Information on cooperation in the field would form the basis on which to build further cooperation.

5. It was also agreed that information centres that were integrated would continue to maintain their functional autonomy, with UNDP resident representatives/United Nations resident coordinators who serve as centre directors reporting to the Department of Public Information on all aspects of the work, administration, budget and staffing of such information centres, all of which would remain independent of the UNDP office concerned. Furthermore, while the sharing of resources was encouraged, the accounts and equipment of the information centres and of UNDP field offices in the same location would be clearly segregated for financial reporting and control purposes.

6. In August 1992, letters jointly signed by the Department of Public Information and UNDP were sent to the following 18 information centres outlining policies and guidelines for the integrated operation: Algiers, Ankara, Antananarivo, Asunción, Bucharest, Cairo, Colombo, Kabul, Kathmandu, Kinshasa, La Paz, Lomé, Managua, Maseru, Monrovia, Panama City, San Salvador and Yangon. Of those, the information centres in Kabul, Monrovia and San Salvador remain temporarily closed. An additional 16 information centres are currently operating under the direction of the UNDP Resident Representative/United Nations Resident Coordinator as Acting Director, without having been formally integrated. These are in Bogota, Brazzaville, Bujumbura, Dakar, Dhaka, Dar es Salaam, Khartoum, Lima, Lusaka, Manama, Manila, Rabat, Tripoli, Warsaw, Windhoek and Yaoundé. In addition, the Department of Public Information has information components that serve under the direction of the UNDP Resident Representatives/United Nations Resident Coordinators in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Eritrea, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

III. Status of the integration exercise

A. Enhancing information activities

7. Ongoing evaluations of the United Nations information centres by the Department of Public Information has shown that, while the objectives of the integration exercise remain as valid today as they were in 1992, problems have been encountered in implementation. In 1997, the Secretary-General's Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities recognized that the experience of integrating information centres with United Nations offices under a resident coordinator had "not been uniformly productive" (see A/AC.198/1997/CRP.1, para. 131; see also paras. 67–68).

8. In assessing the activities of the global network of information centres, the Department of Public Information has found that, in general, the integrated information centres have a lower level of programme delivery and a narrower range of activities than those which have not been integrated. Interaction with the Department of Public Information at Headquarters and the frequency of reporting on activities is also often weaker.

9. Part of the difficulties faced by integrated information centres (as well as those not integrated) is the diminished availability of resources. For instance, since the outset of the integration exercise in 1992, local-level posts have been reduced by some 40 per cent, and four new information centres were established from within existing resources (Bonn, Pretoria, Sana'a and Warsaw).

10. Other problems are related to a lack of familiarity on the part of some UNDP resident representatives/United Nations resident coordinators with the mandate of the Department of Public Information and the work of the United Nations information centres. It has been noted that the level of interest shown by individual UNDP resident representatives/United Nations resident coordinators in the work of a centre can make an important difference in its performance. Several of them have made it possible for national information officers to run the daily information operation in a commendable manner, and have given them their full support, as needed. Information activities pertaining to the work of the United Nations system at the country level have been enhanced by UNDP support to the resident coordinator funds.

B. Cost-effectiveness

11. One of the underlying reasons for the Secretary-General's decision in 1992 to integrate certain information centres was to address in the most efficient manner a situation where staff resources in the field were becoming more and more scarce. Integration with UNDP made it possible for all information centres to be maintained, despite the abolition of a large number of director posts at the P-5 and D-1 levels.

12. At the General Service level, the total number of local-level posts for United Nations information centres was reduced by 29 in the current biennium (1998–1999),

resulting in an overall reduction of 40 per cent since the beginning of the integration exercise. With fewer posts available in each information centre, most locally recruited staff members perform multifaceted functions, including information work. Therefore, any further post reductions would not be possible without negatively affecting programme delivery.

13. Other savings relating to the achievement of economies of scale or the sharing of common services have been more difficult to discern. In cases where an information centre has relocated to common premises with UNDP, maintenance and administrative costs have frequently become higher than they were before the move. However, other benefits have been gained, such as a more central location, additional space and better possibilities for coordinating activities with other United Nations offices. Also, co-location has served to enhance a unified image of the United Nations, which was one of the original objectives of integration.

14. There are benefits from sharing communications networks with UNDP offices in common premises. However, experience in this area has not been uniformly positive. Some UNDP resident representatives/United Nations resident coordinators have made it possible for information centres to use communications systems at reasonable cost. UNDP will encourage all its field offices sharing premises with information centres to facilitate such arrangements.

IV. Next steps

15. To ensure successful integration of United Nations information centres with field offices of UNDP, the purposes of the exercise and the underlying principles, as stated by the General Assembly, must be clearly understood by the parties concerned. Also, UNDP resident representatives/United Nations resident coordinators must recognize country-level communications in support of the United Nations system as a whole as one of their principal functions. In this regard, a set of guidelines, spelling out the operational framework for the integrated information centres, will be jointly elaborated on the basis of the relevant provisions of General Assembly resolutions. Focal points in the Department of Public Information, UNDP and the United Nations Development Group Office have already been designated for this purpose.

16. Such guidelines should also affirm that the information functions and autonomy of United Nations information centres should not be adversely affected by integration. On the contrary, the aim should be to strengthen information activity overall through collaborative partnership with UNDP and other members of the United Nations country team.

17. Some important steps to address issues arising in the integration exercise have already been taken. The United Nations Development Group and the Department of Public Information are actively engaged in a dialogue to deal with the practical aspects of integration. Tasks relating to directing United Nations information centres are being incorporated in the job descriptions of UNDP resident representatives/United Nations resident coordinators, where applicable, and the Department will provide input into their performance evaluation with regard to information functions. It has also been agreed that the Department of Public Information will be consulted in the process of selecting UNDP resident representatives/United Nations resident coordinators in countries where they concurrently serve as centre directors or acting directors. The Department of Public Information has also been invited to join the review of resident coordinators' annual reports.

18. The Under-Secretary-General for Public Information and the Administrator of UNDP have agreed that training and in-depth briefings of UNDP resident representatives/United Nations resident coordinators on their communications functions must be strengthened and systematized. A presentation by the Department of Public Information will be included in induction courses held for UNDP resident representatives/United Nations resident coordinators, and they are encouraged to consult frequently with the Department regarding the operation of the information centres. UNDP resident representatives/United Nations resident coordinators who also serve as centre directors or acting directors will be invited to participate in regional meetings organized by the Department of Public Information for information centre directors. Discussions are ongoing with UNDP to enhance joint briefing programmes and training workshops for the staff of United Nations information centres and for UNDP public affairs officers.

19. The Department of Public Information will strengthen its support structure at Headquarters to enhance its liaison with UNDP regarding the operations of the integrated information centres. Areas that would benefit from this on a day-to-day basis include: the briefings of UNDP resident representatives/United Nations resident coordinators and UNDP public affairs officers; programmatic support; exchange of information; feedback and evaluation; and questions relating to common premises, personnel and budgetary matters. An objective of such close cooperation should also be to seek opportunities for cost savings through shared common services.

20. The role of the national information officers is particularly important in the integrated information centres, given their professional experience and knowledge of the local media and civil society. In order to enhance the calibre of these local professionals, training opportunities, both local and regional, should be increased and exchanges among United Nations information centres in the same region should be encouraged. Measures aimed at improving the conditions of service and career prospects for this category of staff should also be explored.

21. As requested in resolution 51/138 B, I shall continue the integration exercise within the parameters indicated by the General Assembly, most recently reiterated in its resolution 53/59 B. Every effort will be made to ensure that integrated centres optimize the use of available resources and play their role in promoting the information and communications objectives of the Organization.

V. Conclusions

22. The General Assembly has recognized that the United Nations information centres play an essential role in promoting an informed understanding of the work and purposes of the United Nations among the peoples of the world. In the reform plan, I indicated that the Organization's capacity to communicate at the country level must be strengthened, and that United Nations operations at the country level should be unified in "United Nations houses".

23. The integration of United Nations information centres touches on both these central tenets of the reform plan. Achieving this goal, and with it the original objectives of integration, will depend on an effective partnership between the Department of Public Information and UNDP and the constructive involvement of the United Nations family as a whole. I believe, therefore, that the overall changes I have called for to reorient information and communications activities should include a concerted effort to address the problems encountered in implementation of the integration exercise in a number of information centres.

24. To this end, I have asked the Department of Public Information and UNDP to strengthen their cooperative relationship with the aim of achieving better results in the integration exercise. The Deputy Secretary-General will provide guidance when and if required.